

Muslim Women on Islamic Reform

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The Trouble with Islam: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith, by Irshad Manji. St. Martin's Press. Why I Am a Muslim: An American Odyssey, by Asma Gull Hasan. Harper Collins/Element.

Since 9-11 the capacity of Islam for renewal and change has become a central issue in the complex religious and political give-and-take that now surrounds relations between the West and the Muslim community worldwide. Because one of the focal points of Islamic reform is the role of Muslim women, whose social, economic, and political lives have been curbed in the religion, it is refreshing to see two lively North American Muslim women finding their voices.

Irshad Manji's blunt and provocative *The Trouble with Islam* may make her more enemies than friends within what she calls "mainstream" Islam, but that hasn't stopped her from writing this daring book. Manji, who works as a journalist and television personality in Toronto, is no happy camper within the fold: "Islam is on very thin ice with me." Deeply critical, Manji takes seriously the troubling questions that discerning non-Muslims have posed about Islamic fundamentalism. "Honesty" was the word I kept jotting in the margins as I read.

After recapping how her family fled religious persecution in Uganda (under Idi Amin) for British Columbia in 1972, when she was four, Manji discusses her bad experiences in Canada with Islamic religious schools. But most of the book carries Manji's stinging indictments of Muslim attitudes toward women, human rights, Jews, America, and even the Quran. "First and foremost," she writes, "being self-critical means conning clean about the nasty side of the [Quran], and how it informs terrorism." To those Muslim readers who may be cringing, she asks, "Is that a heart attack you're having? Make it fast. Because if we don't speak out against the imperialists within Islam, these guys will walk away with the show."

But it's not all diatribe. Manji's appeal for a mainstream return to *ijtihad* (IJ-tee-had) forms the heart of her call for Islamic reform. *Ijtihad*, the Islamic tradition of independent thinking, is

what Manji considers the answer to jihad (holy war). Without romanticizing Islamic history, she shows the benefits that ijihad once produced for both the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds, and then asks, "When did we stop thinking?" She writes, "We don't have to be prize-winning intellectuals to practice ijihad. All we need to do is openly express our questions about Islam."

Much of the book suggests ways Muslims may liberalize Islam through what she calls "operation ijihad," a widespread initiative that would empower more Muslim women economically, align Islamic human rights codes with the modern world, and reform the radio and television outlets. A liberal Islam would also entail creating a less militant paradigm for the relationship between mosque and state, incorporating more democracy into the Muslim world, and engaging in peaceable interfaith activity. All of this, she concludes, "would give Muslims a future to live for rather than a past to die for."

WHEREAS The Trouble with Islam probes what its author calls "the hidden underbelly of Islam," Asma Gull Hasan's *Why I Am a Muslim* virtually ignores its disturbing aspects to showcase the progressive Islam that she grew up with in Colorado, where she attended a Catholic school. The book's positive-only approach certainly reveals to interested readers the possibilities that the moderate attitudes and beliefs of westernized Muslims bring to the table, but it carries a big downside. The effect paints a too-rosy picture; both of early and modern-day Islam.

Hasan, a graduate of New York University School of Law, spends much of her energies combating anti-Islamic prejudices. Billed as "part memoir, part guide," *Why I Am a Muslim* is replete with chatty, personal anecdotes that show why its author is committed to Islam. More conservative in some of her beliefs than Manji, Hasan nevertheless makes clear that the Islam she practices "is not the one depicted by Osama bin Laden, or by Al Jazeera cable news, or the fear-mongers." Fair enough. But by soft-pedaling significant historical realities such as the violent Islamic "age of the conquests" and Muslim oppression of the dhimmi (the conquered and subjected Jews and Christians), and by limiting her few references to present-day extremism with dismissive statements such as "some Muslims carry out violent acts in Islam's name and use Islam to justify un-Islamic things," the book's picture of Islam seems disingenuous given the current crisis.

Hasan also takes liberties with theological issues and draws historical and social conclusions that many readers will find disturbing, if not untrue. For instance, she takes issue with the common belief that Islam was "really spread by the sword," and she claims that every American Muslim she knows "feels that America is the only true Islamic country—that stands for the values Islam does—a fair and just society like the one Muhammad created in Medina." Other conclusions, such as "Muslims don't have a problem with Christians or Jews or other religions, at least not by Quranic standards," or "The Prophet Muhammad's story reads like the American Dream," simply do not stand in the face of meticulously documented works by acclaimed scholars such as Bat Ye'or.

Yet the book did have me rooting for Hasan at times. She cites common ground between Christian and Muslim beliefs, such as forgiveness and grace, as potential for peaceable interfaith relationships. She expresses personal sentiments that many Christians can "amen," such as that "God provides continuous light, [but] we become caught up in the confusion of daily life and either are distracted from the light or abandon the search for it altogether." She spends a full chapter describing Sufism, the Islamic mystical tradition, to show it as an attractive Muslim alternative to today's extremism. And as a practicing Muslim she is witness to that fact that one can be faithful to the Quran while being solidly an American.

Although neither *The Trouble with Islam* nor *Why I Am a Muslim* will satisfy the intellectual rigors of reformed-minded Islamic scholars or skeptical Americans, both books represent telling voices that can kick-start overdue discussions among Muslims in the grassroots who seek to be faithful to Islam without falling prey to extremism. With modern-day Islamic reform still in its genesis, other voices like these are urgently needed.

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